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“LET ME NOT BE ASHAMED OF MY HOPE”

A SERMON DELIVERED AT THE SERVICE
IN THE WHARNCLIFFE ROOMS

ON JUNE 26, 1909, BY

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“LET ME NOT BE ASHAMED OF MY HOPE”

(PSALM cxix. 116)

I FANCY that everybody in this room knows that we are met to-day not only for the last service of this session, but for the last service in the West End of the Jewish Religious Union as at present constituted. Whether we shall meet elsewhere later on, in a small building of our own, and in a more permanent form, remains to be seen. Many of us earnestly hope that such may be the case. The result partly depends upon the number of those who share that hope, partly upon the willingness and capacity of those who so hope to transform or express their hope in labour and self-sacrifice, and partly upon other considerations, which this is not the place, and this is not the time, to dwell upon or mention.

For various reasons, I do not propose to deliver a long, formal address to you to-day. A last service—even if the last service is to be followed by another service in a fresh form and place—suggests many reflections; and various thoughts—wistful, anxious, tender—will be rising in, and passing through, our minds.

There is, doubtless, much to criticise and much to object to in our services as held now for some five successive years in this hall. The environment and surroundings are not associated with religion. It needs some effort of mind to forget them. The hall is noisy. We are not able here, even if we wished, to impart to

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our services some of that dignity which adds to impressiveness. We could hardly have linked them up more closely with the historic services of the Synagogue by adding to them some of that ceremonial and some of those ritual forms, which, in a building of this kind, would, I think, have been awkward and out of place. If we even meet again for worship in a building of our own, such ritual and ceremonial, while adapted to the needs of to-day and harmonised with our newer convictions and beliefs, will be much more in place and keeping, and will indeed of necessity have to be introduced. We may be able to afford a better and more solemn musical instrument than the one which is now used.

And yet, when all is said and done, and whatever may be our hopes for the future, and however much we may feel that for various reasons, and whatever the future may hold in store for us, it was right that the services in this hall should be brought to a definite close, nevertheless I think and believe—I even hope—that none of us will leave the hall to-day without some feelings of wistful sadness and tender regret. There is nothing inconsistent in this, nothing to be ashamed of. There is nothing inconsistent in this, even for those who are most certain that the course we have taken is the right course. It is not only that a few of those whom we greatly care for and respect—even though they are few in number—like to worship with us in this hall, and like and appreciate our Union, so long as its services are held in this place; it is not only, I say, that these few persons whom we greatly care for and respect may not be among us as our helpers and supporters and fellow-worshippers, if, at a later date, we start again in a small building of our own, but there are other reasons as well. In our short human lives, especially for those of us the number of whose chapters is tending towards the end, or who have passed in all human probability the middle chapter

of the book, the end of any chapter is accompanied by a certain feeling of wistful sadness. Few of us, I think, can finish a particular piece of work, or a year of our lives, or even a summer holiday, without a certain access of yearning melancholy. One more stage has passed in our brief journey towards the grave.

But if we feel like that on other occasions when the end of any particular season or occupation or work has come, we are the more likely to feel it to-day. For this hall, whatever its defects, and whatever its disappointments, has become to many of us an important part of our lives. In this hall were centred many of our dearest hopes and aspirations, and for some of us at least this hall was the scene of activities around which were concentrated much labour, interest, and concern. And in this hall some of us, at any rate, have held communion with God. Here, in these odd surroundings, but forgetting and triumphing over them, some of us have prayed with earnestness and intensity. This hall had been for some of us an oasis of rest and prayerful quiet after a week of labour and varied trials. Here, perhaps, some of us have formed resolutions to be braver, gentler, purer men and women, and have asked the Divine Power and Father to help us to keep them. And, perhaps, in very truth, some of us have indeed done our duty better, in this point or in that, because of our attendance in this hall. Here, perhaps, to some of us has come a soothing and helpful thought which has been of use or strength to us in our daily lives and work. Here, above all, our faith in God, hard for some of us to win and to keep, has been made more living, more constant and more keen. And here, too, some of us—it is not, I think, too much to say—have been brought back to Judaism, even if we had not to be brought back to religion. And thus, so far, at any rate, a blessing has rested upon the sincere, if very imperfect, efforts of the preachers from this place, inasmuch as to a few

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persons they have suggested how Judaism is, and still can be, a religion of to-day and to-morrow, and not merely a museum curiosity or an outworn creed. Here the conviction has come to a few of us that Judaism must be, and can be, not merely the inherited religion of our fathers, but the religion of ourselves, of our brothers and sisters, and, above all, of our children. Here some of us have learned to distinguish between those things in religion which are primary and those which are secondary; between the truths and principles which abide and endure, and the doctrines and the practices which are subject to the destructive criticisms of science or of history. And here we have learned to identify Judaism with the primary rather than with the secondary, with that which lies beyond the reach of science and history to harm or impair rather than with those things which fall within their province.

And so here we have come to believe that not in any other faith, however good that faith may be, however justified its existence, however authorised by God, but in our own faith, in our own religion, in Judaism, is our religious and spiritual health and well-being and happiness to be most securely and assuredly found. Here some who might have drifted right away, so far as religion was concerned, from our own community, have found once more satisfaction and contentment in their own inherited religion. Here finally some of us, just because we have come to believe and realise that Judaism is capable of development, expansion, new-birth, have been reunited with their brethren. Just through differences have we been brought to realise a deeper and underlying unity. Through Liberal Judaism we have been kept within Judaism, we have been enabled to cling to those fundamental beliefs of the Mission and the Divine purpose in Israel's history which, without it, would inevitably have slipped from our grasp or perished from our souls.

Surely these are results upon which we can look back with satisfaction and gratitude. It is true that they only apply to a small band, a select few ; but every soul is of importance—of importance to itself, of importance to Judaism ; yes, even of importance to God.

And if it be true, as I think it is, that the services in this hall during the seven years of their existence have been productive, to this person and to that, of one or other of these results, in varying degrees and in different proportions and combinations, it is not unnatural that the occasion of the last service in this familiar place should evoke in us some feelings of wistful sadness. What the future may bring forth we do not know ; what the past, with all its inadequacies and imperfections, has done for us—*that* we remember and call to mind. But we must not linger too long upon the past ; we must, if we are really grateful for it, think the more ardently about the present and the future. We must the more keenly desire that any good results which have so far been achieved may be preserved, consolidated, and extended ; that the good which has touched the hearts of ten may before long touch the hearts of a hundred, and that in another and more permanent form the Jewish Religious Union may continue to work in the cause of Judaism, of religion, and of God.

Into our hopes for the future I cannot further enter here. Nor will I say anything more as to the reasons which have led us, whatever may happen in the future, to bring the services in this hall to a close. They end to-day, partly because we hope that something better and more permanent may succeed them, partly because, though we have a good deal to be thankful for, our seven years' experience has shown us that we cannot gradually build up a large edifice—I am using a metaphor—and accomplish important constructive work, quite upon the old lines, and partly because the present labourers

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are not equal to continue, unassisted, the same yearly task. For these reasons we close the services to-day, but we hope, in the words of the familiar French proverb, that it is, and will be, a case of *reculer pour mieux sauter*, pausing and ending for a time to make a more efficient progress later on.

But whatever happens, whether the hopes of some of us are realised in a concrete form or not, I would venture, in a few brief sentences, to beg those who listen to me to-day not to lose, so far as they are concerned, any results—any inward results—so far achieved and acquired.

Whether we succeed or fail in any further efforts, I would beg of them not to lose heart in those big spiritual realities for which we stand. It may perchance *not* be granted to us to-day, in this quarter of London, to achieve or produce something more permanent and adequate for the cause of Liberal Judaism. That remains to be seen. But let no one for a moment confuse with the results of our small efforts the cause of Liberal Judaism itself.

I have said how, for this one and for that, the results of our services have been an awakening or a re-awakening of the religious life; how one person has perchance moved on from ethical culture to religion, another from indifferentism to keenness, a third from scepticism to faith, while a fourth, who was, at any rate, drifting away from *Judaism*, has been brought back to it in thankfulness and in joy. But, in addition to these, there have, I think, been a few others who, through our services, once more learnt, or learnt for the first time, the secret of communion and of prayer. These things are not spoken about in public; it is only from stray hints, and indications here and there, that I gather and infer that these things have, in some instances, been the blessed issue of our Union services. And if, and in so far as, this has been the case, I would beg those of

whom any of these things are true not to lose heart or lose courage whatever happens in the future to this Union and to its services. We may, indeed, pray with the Psalmist, “Let me not be ashamed of my hope”—may it be Thy will that my hope may be realised—but of our deeper hope, of our deeper faith, we cannot and shall not be ashamed. The reasons, the experience, which have brought and bring us to our faith in God, to faith in a divine goodness, are independent of the temporary success or failure—I use the ordinary human words—of any particular religious movement. If that faith, with the communion which may be both its cause and its result, has come to, or has been vitalised and increased in, some few persons through attendance at these services, I would entreat them not to let it go, not to let it become weaker, whether our services are resumed or no. Let them practise prayer in their own chamber, if they cannot practise it within a synagogue. Let their courage be not quenched, let their faith be not weakened; whatever happens to us and to our movement, the Lord reigneth, the Lord hath reigned, the Lord shall reign for ever and ever. In the deepest of all senses, if they on their part strive for its accomplishment, God will fulfil their prayer, and of their hope they shall not be ashamed.

And so of Judaism in general, and of Liberal Judaism in particular. Let them not be ashamed of their hope. “Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit, saith the Lord.” If not in this generation, then in the next; if not to-day in England, then elsewhere. For God fulfils Himself in many ways. Be strong and of good courage was the old injunction, and be strong and of good courage is the message to us still. The faith which we have won and developed in this place, the clearer understanding which has come to us of Judaism and its possibilities—let these not be weakened or impaired, whatever the future may have in store for us. Our

cause is so infinitely greater and truer than the feeble individuals who, here to-day and gone to-morrow, are its representatives and exponents. Let their present weakness, our own personal weakness, never make us falter in the truth and beauty of our cause. And weak though we be, let us not make ourselves weaker than we are. God needs our weakness, our feeble strength, as much as in other days and in other lands He needed men much stronger and better than ourselves. Let us not make of our weakness an excuse for discouragement or rashness. Let us keep to the faith, that purified, developing and progressive Jewish faith, which our services in this place have helped to implant and quicken in our midst. Let us be true to the highest we have learnt and gained, to the highest to which we have aspired and dared, even though we have had of it but glimpses, forebodings, and anticipations. To this highest and truest let us cling in courage and in faith ; and then, while working and striving that the best may come, and that our most ardent wishes may be realised, yet, come what may, of our hope we shall not be ashamed. Amen.

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